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The Essential Role of Modern Women in *Top Girls* by Caryl Churchill

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Abstract:

This article investigates the comprehensive representations of modern women in Caryl Churchill's play *Top Girls*. The study starts by looking at how feminist ideals evolved, then examines feminist literary criticism and how it may challenge patriarchal narratives, especially via theatre and literature. The paper investigates significant characters from Churchill's *Top Girls*, including Marlene, Joyce, Win, and Louise, to emphasise their opposing views on the profession, parenting, and social class. It highlights Churchill's criticism of the neoliberal concept of meritocracy and the limits of capitalist feminism, which often sacrifices human ties and women's solidarity. Churchill's character dynamics and conversation call into question the concept of universal sisterhood, highlighting the differences produced by different social, economic, and political environments. Finally, the paper asserts that "*Top Girls*" promotes a more inclusive vision of modern women's various roles and problems, pushing for unity that limits class, culture, and individual ambition.

Keywords: Top Girls, Career, Caryl Churchill, modern women, motherhood, feminism.

1. Introduction

Throughout history, patriarchal systems that favoured male supremacy and control have denied women basic human rights. Feminist movements arose in reaction to such oppression, aiming to question and demolish these systems while fighting for women's rights and equality. However, feminism is not a static term; its definition and purpose have developed throughout time, affected by geographical, cultural, and social settings. As a result, the definition of feminism varies greatly between nations and historical periods, ranging from a call for peace and equality to a more extreme challenge to institutional oppression. At its foundation, feminism seeks to remove gender disparities and build a society based on equality and fairness, encouraging women to achieve freedom and self-actualization (Offen, 1988).

Carden (1974) claims that Feminist criticism in literary and cultural studies has transformed how women's roles are analyzed by emphasizing the need to confront sexism, gender biases, and patriarchal narratives. Caryl Churchill, a well-known playwright, has made substantial contributions to this discussion with her revolutionary piece *Top Girls*. The play is set against the background of late twentieth-century feminist movements, and it employs real and fictitious

female characters to examine the complexity and paradoxes inherent in feminism. Churchill's work questions simple notions of sisterhood investigates the influence of social and economic institutions on women, and criticizes the many feminist philosophies that have affected the lives of contemporary women.

This article contends that in *Top Girls*, Churchill critiques the "essential role" of modern women by exploring the conflicts between career ambition and traditional values, the limitations of capitalist feminism, and the complexities of solidarity among women from various social and cultural backgrounds. This study looks at key characters including Marlene, Joyce, Win, and Louise to see how Churchill undermines the idea of a shared feminist identity and pushes for a more subtle, inclusive understanding of women's diverse experiences and struggles in modern society.

2. Waves of Feminism

Feminist movements have transformed and witnessed changes throughout history, and those changes are an outcome of the developments of the movement, most movements witness changes and alternations in the manifestos, yet feminism is accused of changing its agenda, and identical perspective through each movement or as it is academically known as "waves." Those fluctuations reflect the social problems and obstacles in that period. In extension, from the past, there is no fixed definition for "feminism". It is clear lexically. However, it is used to be defined according to the media's perspective or people's understanding. Feminism has been a very controversial concept from the past till now (Johnson, 2017).

Mohajan (2022) states that the movement assembled in different waves, historically, it is divided into four waves, despite the alternations all the waves advocate women's rights in society. The first wave was the emergence of the first natural political wave belongs to the late 19th century to the mid-20th century; however, the initial attempts appeared earlier, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft, a British philosopher, wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), a groundbreaking book on feminism. The book advocates for the empowerment of women in education, politics, society, and marriage. The first wave demanded fundamental rights, such as voting and work. The goals of the first wave were considered essential and straightforward, which insisted on women's social acknowledgement (Wrye, 2009). The second wave was extended from the first wave with some essential changes regarding the claims and ideology of the movement. This movement emerged in the 1960s to 70s. This wave encompassed three distinct forms of feminism, which were organized hierarchically. Among these, bourgeois/liberal Feminism was considered the least politically powerful since it did not support radical/cultural Feminism's aim to dismantle patriarchy to

protect women's social, cultural, and sexual empowerment. Furthermore, it did not promote the radical overhaul of society's economic, political, and social systems as socialist/materialist feminism did. Furthermore, each feminist dynamic had an artistic equivalent; for instance, bourgeois/liberal Feminism maintained fidelity to traditional realistic forms while attempting to create new roles for women within the boundaries of traditional theatrical literature. Radical and cultural feminism emerged as a reaction to the newly identified concepts and possibilities of a 'women's language', which were strongly influenced by new French feminist theories (Mohajan, 2022). On the other hand, socialist and materialist feminism established its aesthetic based on the presentational forms, techniques, and performance registers inherited from Brechtian philosophy.

The third wave of feminism occurred between the 1990s and 2000s; it evolved from its predecessors, moving on to issues such as sexual harassment, gender-role stereotypes, and intersectionality term coined by Kimberly Williams Crenshaw, an American Civil Rights Activist, during the third wave when it found its platform. Intersectionality examines oppression as a collection of biases based on gender, race, and socioeconomic class. With the introduction of the internet, feminists were able to get greater attention, pitting their ideals against a patriarchal society (Mohajan, 2022).

The most recent fourth wave of feminism came with the advent of social media, which enabled even greater levels of communication with women across the world. Fourth-wave feminists promote women's empowerment via independence, equitable opportunity, speaking out against abusers, and inclusivity. While earlier waves rebelled against their patriarchal counterparts, fourth wavers sought the support of their society's men in order to make headway against those who prioritize male interests. Throughout history, several waves and movements have formed, and despite their diversity and distinction, the goal has remained the same: to defend women's rights and maintain their fundamental prerogatives (Wrye, 2009).

2.1 Feminist Criticism

Before the feminist movement, discourses predominantly revolved around male perspectives. Men had always defined women not based on their inherent qualities but rather in relation to themselves. As Simone de Beauvoir, the French philosopher and writer stated she was never considered an independent entity; "Now, woman has always been, if not man's slave, at least his vassal" (Beauvoir, 2011). Women had been considered inferior to men, and feminism as a movement was a reaction against it. Feminist criticism seeks equality and legal rights for women in all areas of politics, culture, and society. On the other hand, bell hooks defines feminism as a social movement that seeks to confront and exert authority over sexism, as well

as the oppressive and exploitative treatment rooted in gender (Hooks, 2000). Furthermore, Tyson (2014) states that Sex and gender are persistent variables contributing to the differential social standings of males and females. Sex generally pertains to the innate and physiological differences between males and females. Simultaneously, gender refers to the acquired social, psychological, and cultural attitudes and actions related to males and females.

Feminist criticism analyses how literature and other cultural works either support or challenge women's economic, social, political, and psychological subjugation. According to Bressler (2011), Feminist criticism encompasses diverse ideologies: Scholars and critics categorize it differently. Some scholars as Toril Moi divide it into four groups: Anglo-American feminism, poststructuralist feminism, materialist feminism, and postmodern feminism. Others, like Rosemarie Tong critics, categorise it into numerous subcategories, varying in number from nine to over thirty. These include cultural feminism, amazon feminism, ecofeminism, material feminism, postcolonial feminism, etc. (Christina, 2011, pp. 157-158).

Feminism started as a social, and political movement, later, the resistance of women expanded worldwide, so the concept of Feminism became wider. In addition, the concept of feminism took a place in literature as a tool for reflecting society. Consequently, authors have had the opportunity to prove their ideas and influence other women to protest and transcend those committed against females. Female authors' contribution to literature is highly valued. Through their brilliant works and valuable contributions, they influenced society.

The history of literature recorded so many feminist authors like Kate Chopin, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood, etc. and their contributions to literature will stay forever as effective. In a society dominated by males, the conflict of genders will be founded. The conflict between genders exists in both primitive society and modern societies. It is founded on different aspects of life, including social and personal life. Literature always influences society and can change the terminal mainstream that particularly services males. Moreover, theatre is counted as one of the most influential genres of literature; through theatre and Drama, various ideas and perspectives have been discussed and performed by people. The theatre is effective since it is considered visual art. In the 1960s and 70s, feminist theatre emerged from the second wave of the feminist movement. It became widely understood and recognized in that era (Carden, 1974).

3. Caryl Churchill

Caryl Churchill was born in 1938. She grew up in London and Montreal, and studied in the English literature department at Oxford University, this place influenced her and developed her intense attraction to Drama. She demonstrated her talent by publishing and producing three

plays before graduating from Oxford University, one of which was *Downstairs*, which was performed at the National Student Drama Festival in 1958 and won the first prize. Soon after, she gained fame as a radio dramatist. In the early 1970s, she wrote several scripts for BBC radio dramas. Later in 1972, Churchill shifted to television and theatre, she contributed six plays to BBC by 1981. In terms of comparison, Churchill was not completely as satisfied with the television experience as the theatre work, according to (Aston E. , 2010), theatre work was a free space for Churchill where she was capable of writing without the pressure of society and politics.

Churchill's collaboration with the Royal Court Theatre spanned several years, starting around 1972. This experience exposed her to a structure of political challenges that are artistically committed theatre of "The Court". Churchill was recognized as the first woman to hold the position of resident dramatist at the Royal Court Theatre in 1975. This position allowed her to examine the limits and diversity of traditional and orthodox theatre repetitively (Gale, 2016). Churchill was enthusiastic about the theatrical investigation, her impulse led her to integrate the appearance of feminist insights into contemporary views. This movement drove audiences to criticize institutions and beliefs that had previously been taken for granted, both in theatre and in society; this helped to develop Churchill into a feminist socialist criticism of society. She received an Obie Award for best play in 1983 for her play *Top Girls*, which explores the theme of women suppressing their humanity in pursuit of power within a male-dominated society. She ties a character's personal growth with large-scale social change in plays such as *Top Girls*; this demonstrates her conviction in the ordinary person's power to effect substantial changes in themselves and their environment. Churchill's works have had a long-lasting impact on theatrical practices, customs, gender stereotypes, and socioeconomic goals during the last two decades and up to the present day (Christina, 2011).

3.1 *Top Girls*

Top Girls employs historical pageantry to critique easy assumptions about universal sisterhood by showcasing the complexities and contradictions among women from different periods and backgrounds. The play's famous opening act resembles earlier feminist pageants by bringing together historical and fictional women to explore diverse experiences of womanhood. In the initial action, the author shows a variety of great women from history. It is a provocative image of different women from different ages, embodied in a diverse range of costumes that reflect their professions, nationalities, social classes, and historical eras. These include Isabella Bird, a nineteenth-century traveler; Lady Nijo, a thirteenth-century Japanese courtesan and nun; the apocryphal ninth-century Pope Joan; Dulle Gret, from a sixteenth-century painting by

Brueghel; and the Patient Griselda from several mediaeval literary works. The scene showcases a captivating visual display of sisterhood that, as Amelia Howe Kritzer observes, offers a comprehensive amalgamation of these women's experiences, strengths, and resistance tactics from different historical periods, serving as a source of inspiration for contemporary women facing challenges (Aston E. , 2009).

Unlike suffrage-era spectacles that often idealized female solidarity, Churchill deconstructs this notion by highlighting the divisions and tensions among women. Churchill uses overlapping dialogue to reveal the dissonant relationships among women, emphasizing that shared gender does not easily transcend differences in culture, politics, and class. Another significant concern of the play is the image of the two sisters of the space, Marlene and Joyce. Marlene and Joyce, sisters with contrasting worldviews and lifestyles, embody the conflict between modern ambition and traditional values. Moreover, the exchanges in the acts likewise draw attention to differences among women, similarly the relationship between Marlene and Joyce. While the ideological conflict between Marlene and Joyce seems irreconcilable, Churchill challenges the audience to consider alternative paths for women's solidarity beyond the constraints presented in the play. On the other hand, the play does not entirely reject the possibility of unified sisterhood but subtracts it as an absent ideal whose realization (Cameron, 2009). Ultimately, Churchill's 'Top Girls' critiques the limitations of both historical and contemporary feminism, calling for a more inclusive representation of women's diverse experiences and struggles (Solga, 2008).

3.2 Role of Modern Women in *Top Girls*

According to (Aston E. , 2010), society specifies the pivotal role of women. Thus, there is a variety of perspectives on women's roles. Women's position in society is complex, nonetheless, it depends on the culture of a specific society. In some societies they might take two fundamental positions; either she owns a career and be an independent woman, or she is a housewife and dependent woman. The significant role of both could not be denied. Thus, Churchill exposes the depiction of both positions by two sisters. Marlene is the protagonist of the play, and she is the central character. She works in an employment agency. She has been promoted to director of the agency "*Top Girls*". Her ambitions and dreams about her career have led her to neglect her family, including her daughter Angie. As a result, she could not balance her family and career.

In contrast, Joyce is a housewife; she is not a worker and raises Marlene's daughter because of her mother's busyness. Joyce exposes the perspective of the working class. However, she is not a particularly sympathetic character and is very resentful of her sister. Marlene and Joyce

do not get along well because of their different vision of life. So, through the character of the play, we observe the different attitudes toward careers and their significance for modern women. The matter of work is a central concept in the play and is lightly observed in Act Two. Win is one of the female characters in the play and the top girls' agency as well; she is a hard worker and focuses on her career. The conflict between males and females and the discrimination of gender is observed in her speech:

Win: Oh yes, all that and a science degree, funnily enough. I started out doing medical research, but there was no money. I thought I would go abroad. Did they sell Coca-Cola in Russia and Pepsi-cola in China? You might think you can be qualified more than you are. Men are awful bullshitters, and they like to make out jobs that are harder than they are. In any job I did, I started doing better than the rest of the crowd, and they did not like it. So, I would get unpopular and drink to cheer myself up. I lived with a man and supported him for four years, but he could not get work. After that, I went to California. I like the sunshine. (Churchill, 1982)

Win exposes the suffering of women as well as describes the obstacles that could face women in patriarchal societies. Patriarchal structures create barriers in their job that minimise their contribution. She also states that men often exaggerate the complexity and importance of their work to maintain power. Win states that in all her jobs she did "better than the rest of the crowd" and yet this led to her becoming "unpopular". This demonstrates that doing well or outperforming at jobs does not lead women to recognition or advancement, but resentment. Women's experience is undervalued and unrecognised as men devalue their efforts. Although Win worked better than men, no one admitted this fact. Win's experience represents the greater reality of many modern women, who, although being educated and talented, confront societal impediments that prevent them from attaining their full potential. This problem still exists in modern life, so many females are denied different positions only because of gender discrimination, although they are qualified enough. On the other hand, other commercial reasons prevent women from working. In some institutions, women cannot be hired because it is expected that they need work vacations more than men because of their responsibility for family and children, which affects the productivity of the institutions.

Moreover, the play offers a multifaceted criticism of modern women's fundamental function, as formed by both patriarchal and capitalist institutions. Win's narrative is a reflection on the contrasts that modern women face: the strive for independence, the yearning for acknowledgement, the weight of undervaluation, and the emotional labour of combining

societal standards with personal wants. Churchill's work, via Win, conveys the splintered reality of women seeking fulfilment in a society that often fails to recognize and reward their entire ability. Hence the neglecting of women in their careers is described by another character in the play:

Louise: There you are. I have lived for that company and given my life; you could say that because I have not had much social life, I have worked in the evenings. I have not had office entanglements for the very reason you just mentioned, and if you are committed to your work, you move in only a few other circles. (Churchill, 1982)

Churchill exposes the suffering of women in an innovative method, where she reflects on all the pressures that a woman could face a woman those lives in a society dominated by patriarchy. It demonstrates the character's suffering. She decided to leave her job, after she presented all her experience and effort for the company's sake, but no one appreciated her; therefore, she preferred to concede her position. The term "given my life" implies a complete dedication to her career, even at the expense of her personal life and well-being. This echoes the feminist perspective that patriarchal employment arrangements require extra labour and dedication from women while not necessarily providing the same benefits or recognition as men. Furthermore, it also shows women's pride that could not be affected by financial temptations. The author declares that women are working to fulfil their dreams, achieve their aims, and be independent; the matter is more than employment or a position that provides them with excellent financial gain. Career depicts the self-realization and recognition of females.

Marlene: I do not mean anything personal. I do not believe in class. Anyone can do anything if they have got what it takes.

Joyce: And if they have not?

Marlene: If they are stupid, lazy, or frightened, I will not help them get a job; why should I?

Joyce: What about Angie?

Marlene: What about Angie?

Joyce: She is stupid, lazy, and frightened, so what about her?

Marlene: You run her down too much. She will be all right (Churchill, 1982).

The last conversation between Marlene and Joyce shows the different aspects of their life. Marlene shows her originality about her job so that she is a working woman and independent and handles her responsibilities at work accurately. On the other hand, her sister Joyce is not a worker, but she raised her daughter instead. The conversation shows that Marlene is unaware

of her daughter and does not know her like Joyce. This conversation exposes a sense of irony, Marlene is passionate about her work, but her personal life is dissolved. Moreover, according to Marlene, she does not subscribe to the concept of class. This statement expresses a neoliberal feminist viewpoint that emphasises individual initiative and meritocracy, asserting that anybody with the necessary skills and abilities can achieve anything. achievement perspective posits that women may attain success by diligent effort and unwavering resolve, disregarding the institutional obstacles of social class and gender that can impede achievement. On the other hand, Marlene's conception of a world without social classes is simplistic and disregards the existing structural disparities. This accords with the criticism of certain branches of feminism that give priority to individual empowerment and professional achievement without acknowledging the fundamental socio-economic systems that sustain inequality. Joyce said, "And if they have not?" Expressly challenges Marlene's meritocratic perspective by highlighting the unequal distribution of opportunity and assistance among individuals. Joyce's inquiry subtly criticises Marlene's limited comprehension of intersectionality, which refers to the interdependence of race, class, gender, and other characteristics that exacerbate disadvantages for certain minority groups. This conflict between Marlene and Joyce exemplifies the conflict between liberal feminism, which prioritises individual rights and accomplishments, and socialist feminism, which underscores the importance of tackling structural inequities that impact marginalised groups. Joyce's perspective is in line with socialist feminist criticisms that advocate for communal action and structural transformation instead of just emphasising individual achievement.

Moreover, Marlene criticizes lazy and frightened people, while Joyce accuses Marlene's daughter of the same quality. Although Marlene tries to deny that her daughter belongs to this category of people, the play ends with the scene of her daughter waking up at night, and she screams, "frightened, frightened" (Churchill, 1982). Angie might be the ultimate victim of a competitive world. However, the diversity of women represented in the office implies that work is a major source of worry for women in general. The play does not argue that women should not go to work; plainly, they must and want to, but employment unavoidably has an impact on their whole lives, sometimes negatively, due to societal limitations that punish women and limit their ability (Naismith & Worrall, 1991). However, Joyce's concern for Angie, "What about Angie?" emphasises the need for community and solidarity among women, implying that the feminist movement should not exclude those who are less competent or confident. Joyce's critique of Marlene's attitude reveals the unpleasant fact that modern women who achieve success often do so by adhering to patriarchal ideas of rivalry and self-reliance rather than

cooperating and supporting one another. Furthermore, within the feminist debate on what constitutes the "essential role" of a contemporary woman, this conversation between Marlene and Joyce highlights the contradiction. Marlene characterises the modern, professional woman who places personal success as a top priority and embraces the mindset of self-determined success. Joyce, conversely, embodies a socially focused viewpoint, prioritising empathy and acknowledging structural barriers.

4. Conclusion

The theatre has a significant impact on society as well as literature. Both can make remarkable changes in people's perspectives; thus, Caryl Churchill is one of the influential authors who exposed the female problem in her works. Her works contributed to English literature; *Top Girls* is one of her well-known works of Churchill. In this play, she exposes the image of British women after 1970; in addition, she attempts to promote the idea of the ideal sisterhood in modern life as she starts the first act of the play by gathering a group of women from different historical epochs to showcase the evolvement of the women crises in the society. Gender discrimination is another crucial concern of the play, especially in career competitions. Through the characters, it is discovered that the female characters face many struggles in their work. Although they are qualified as much as males, they must earn equal opportunities. *Top Girls* is a striking indictment of the roles and expectations that contemporary women face in a society driven by both patriarchal and capitalist forces. Churchill questions conventional feminist ideas via the play's complicated character relationships and conversation, she emphasizes the tensions between professional goals, personal sacrifices, and the need for solidarity among women from various socioeconomic and cultural origins. The examination of major individuals such as Marlene, Joyce, Win, and Louise demonstrates how multiple feminist ideologies liberal, socialist, and radical intersect and often conflict, challenging the concept of a cohesive feminist identity.

Churchill depicted the different images of a working woman and a housewife woman through two sisters in the play. Both characters have shortages in their lives and consequently are unhappy. Moreover, the play exposes the situation of the children of an employed mother; it shows Angie, Marlene's daughter, as a victim of this competition. The play does not declare that women should not work; it says that women need and want to work, but it shows the social restrictions forced on women. The author exposes that work inevitably affects women's whole life. Employment and career put women in a critical situation and demanded a crucial decision; finally, the play reveals that women in contemporary British society should sacrifice their private and personal lives for their careers. The play concludes that, although modern women

seek freedom and respect, these goals are often constrained by cultural expectations and economic institutions that value individual achievement above community strength. *Top Girls* advocates for a more delicate knowledge of women's different experiences by showing the problems and inconsistencies they confront in their personal and professional lives, as well as for an inclusive, intersectional, and solidarity-focused feminism.

Churchill's study indicates that no one story or viewpoint defines the "essential role" of contemporary women. Instead, it must address the complexities of navigating both the public and private worlds, while also acknowledging the need for structural change to achieve genuine equality and justice for women. Through *Top Girls*, Churchill not only analyses the limits of historical and present feminism but also advocates for a more complete understanding of women's roles and difficulties in modern society, encouraging us to seek alternate pathways to unity and empowerment.

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